RE-ENERGIZING STATE-CITIZEN RELATIONS
A ROBUST DEMOCRACY PROVIDES CITIZENS WITH CONSEQUENTIAL AND BINDING VOICE IN BETWEEN ELECTIONS

Marjan H. Ehsassi[1]

It is time for a major reset - a democratic paradigm shift. Across western democracies, citizen disengagement from political institutions is pervasive and palpable. While evidence suggests higher voter turnout in some places, citizen distrust in elected representatives is at an all-time high and polarization continues to threaten the fabric of our civil society. What can we do to reverse this trend? We must first formulate a vision for the type of democratic culture we want and then explore innovations that engage citizens and re-energize state-citizen relations.
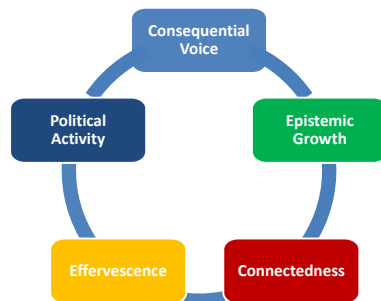
A Thriving Democratic Culture

At its core, a citizen-centric democracy is inclusive, responsive and represents the will and preferences of the people. The fundamental principles of citizen engagement require that we:

1) Think beyond elections[2] and provide **consistent voice** to citizens in between electoral cycles;
2) Align policies with citizen preferences and allow **meaningful citizen input** in government decision making and reform; and,
3) Introduce innovative and non-traditional platforms (beyond town-halls) for **impactful citizen participation** in social, political, and economic issues.

The diagram below demonstrates that to promote a healthy democratic culture, governments must cultivate an environment that promotes the following characteristics: 1. Learning and **Epistemic Growth**, 2. Social Cohesion and **Connectedness**, 3. Enthusiasm and **Effervescence**, 4. **Political Activity**, and 5. A Sense of Meaningful Input and **Consequential Voice**).

Engaged Civic and Political Citizen Model

Ehsassi 2022

The Transformative Impact of Deliberative Platforms such as Citizens' Assemblies

There has been an explosion of deliberative democratic innovations, in particular government-led Deliberative Mini-Publics (DMPs). The OECD's *Catching Deliberative Wave*[3] documents the way in which these innovative platforms are sweeping through western democracies with the promise and

---

[2] For an overview, see David Van Reybrouk, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* (London: Bodley Head, 2016) and Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[3] https://www.oecd.org/governance/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm

expectation of involving citizens in the policy-making cycle. The empirical data gathered relies on the analysis of three DMPs[4] and tests the extent to which they activate the five essential features of an engaged civic and political citizen, as described above. The three platforms studied include 1. the French Citizens' Convention for the Climate (2019-2020); 2. the hybrid Brussels Parliament's Deliberative Committee on Homelessness (2021); and 3. the second Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Expression (2021) and weave participant observations in Paris, Brussels, and Ottawa, with rich testimony from 51 in-depth interviews and 179 surveys.

While not a panacea, the *Deliberative Wave* can increase levels of citizen engagement and must be celebrated. However, current practice does not consistently reflect the potential of DMPs. For these platforms to be transformational, best practices should be developed and decisions made by implementers and government representatives should undergo greater rigor and reflection. The resulting empirical data has driven a set of recommendations to ensure stronger metrics and greater design and procedural integrity. For instance, to maximize citizens' sense of meaningful voice, effort should be made to incorporate the following ten steps into a DMP process:

Guidelines to Maximize Participants' Consequential and Binding Voice

For a High-Impact Deliberative Mini-Public (DMP) that elevates participants' perception of voice :

1) The DMP is tasked by a government body with assigned government DMP champions/supporters
2) Move from consultative to binding decision-making mandates by placing a higher burden of accountability and responsiveness on government
3) The selection of mandate is driven by the public so that participants have a sense of ownership over the topic/problem statement
4) Roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders are well articulated and consistently communicated
5) Deliverables are manageable in form and proposals are realistic in number
6) Process-related decisions are well thought-out and professionalized (ie. information gathering, quality of deliberation, duration, location, shared meals, group activities, and deliberation-trained facilitators)
7) Government presence is required at the beginning and the end of the process
8) Participants' present their recommendations to government on the last day
9) Follow-up mechanisms are clearly laid out and include frequent written and verbal updates along with a possibility for participant appeal of government decisions
10) Explore innovative approaches to connect mini-public to maxi-public and media for enhanced DMP credibility, impact and legitimacy

Marjan H. Ehsassi 2022

Since the release of the OECD report, with the notable exception of the United States, governments and parliaments across Western Europe, Australia and Canada have not only implemented DMPs but have begun to institutionalize these processes into their governance structures. Examples of permanent citizens' committees are the German-speaking community of Belgium's *Ostbelgien Model* and the City of Paris' Standing Citizens' Assembly. Most recently, the City of Marseille announced that it is investing in the future with a permanent citizens' assembly.

Citizen-centered agendas recognize the public as a resource and offer meaningful innovative platforms such as Citizens' Assemblies that engage with citizens to provide consequential voice. As institutionalization becomes more widespread, governments can begin to adopt national mechanisms such as the *Democracy Action Fund*[5] to further expand representative democracies, reach marginalized communities across countries and more adequately represent the preferences of the people.

---

[4] Note that these are instruments that are supported and sponsored by government but led by an independent body trained in deliberation.

[5] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6005ceb747a6a51d636af58d/t/6010d0afcf56e50b6225c3cc/1611714741352/DAF2020.pdf